

Should they stay or should they go? How local authority make decisions about museum services in an era of austerity

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Abstract

This paper focuses on decisions taken by in local authorities in response to the severe budget cuts following the 2008 financial crisis with regard to spending on museum services. Through selected empirical materials from two local authorities engaged in deciding where to allocate cultural spending, specifically deciding which museums would continue to receive regular funding to the concomitant withdrawal of funding from others, the paper proposes the notions of 'knowledge events and non-events' and 'knowledge potency' as a means of investigating how and based on what considerations these decisions are made. My interest is as much if not more in the processes by which decisions are made than the products of decisions. This means my investigation considers the mechanisms and techniques involved in decision making just as much as it does the people in order to address the limited agency of the knowledge claims made by stakeholders beyond local authorities to influence decisions or to unsettle the bases on which decisions are routinely made. However, the paper is not a simple account of purposive local authority dominance informed by individual machinations. Rather, the paper is firstly an illustration of the influence of routine ways of working on decisions and the limitations thereof. Secondly, the paper explores how relatively mundane information about individual museums becomes significant in determining their future when local authorities are enveloped by austerity. Underpinning the paper is an argument for austerity to be considered as more than a set of financial constraints and instead as an atmosphere that forecloses local authorities from taking decisions based on long-term considerations or concerns with type of benefit from local authority museums ought to generate, occupied as they are with crisis management and a loss of expectation that future financial conditions might be otherwise.

Introduction

It is now a decade since the financial crisis of 2008, yet its reverberations are still being felt around the world. The austerity measures that were imposed on English local authorities by the UK government provide the context for this paper, as they led to a landscape of cuts in local government spending with severe impacts on the provision of public services. No domain of public services seem to be shielded from these cuts: social care, education, waste collection and infrastructure have all been the subject of extensive cuts with the provision of cultural services such as libraries and museums being no exception.

The purpose of this paper is consider how decisions are made about museum provision in this climate. Budgets for museum provision have been severely diminished as a consequence of austerity measures imposed by central government. However, funding has not been entirely withdrawn, making the question of which museums continue to be supported, why and crucially, who (or what) decides, a matter of pressing concern. This article explores this question through an analysis of empirical material drawn from two English local authorities where the solution proposed to the problem of budget cuts was to withdraw funding from individual museum sites in order that the limited budget still available could be invested into what became known as the 'core offer' or 'core service'. Its purpose is to explore various factors with an influence on decisions. I do not suggest singular pieces of information or moments be understood as points where decisions are made. Rather, various pieces of information become significant for a decision and my purpose is to draw attention both to what these pieces of information are, the mechanisms by which they gain influence, and how austerity increases the potency of certain pieces of information or characteristics of individual museums in terms of their influence on decisions taken.

This emerging distinction between core and periphery is at the heart of the paper as its purpose is a consideration of how local authorities decide – both who decides and based on what knowledge – which museums they can justify maintaining as part of the core service to the concomitant relegation of others. I do not seek to explore the fate of these others, partly because I have done so elsewhere (Rex 2018a) but also because it is beyond the paper's focus on decision-making. However, before continuing and for context, it is necessitate to highlight the severity of the circumstances that follow a decision to withdraw regular funding. Local authority museums that have their funding withdrawn are either permanently closed or subject to a complex process called 'community asset transfer' whereby responsibility for their management and financing is transferred from the local authority to an external organisation, usually one that self-organises for the purpose of 'saving' the museum from closure. The sustainability of these arrangements for the groups undertaking

museum management in this context or for the museums themselves is far from clear (Rex 2018a).

Local authority personnel have no choice but to deliver budget savings. However, they do have a degree of discretion as to how they are delivered and how these decisions are made. Questions of decision making and the distribution of resources for culture have mostly been explored in a central government context, and in relation to the forms of evidence on which policy is made (Donovan and O'Brien 2015; O'Brien 2012). This has been to the relative neglect of the same questions being posed of local government. Local authority museums number over 700 out of an estimated 2,500 museums in the UK (Museums Association), making them an important part of the UK's public cultural domain and, as such, an important topic for study. Further, the main fault-lines opening up as a result of budget cuts appear to be according to where museums are located and whether they have national status or direct government funding through non-departmental sponsored bodies (mainly via DDCMS, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), as opposed to local authority status and funding. England's national museums have experienced cuts of approximately 30% since 2012, while some local authority museums report cuts between 2010-17 of 69%ⁱ (Mason 2016). Put simply, the circumstances facing local authority cultural provision are severe, yet how these circumstances are dealt with has so far been neglected by the literature.

As Gray observes, 'there is a lack of detailed empirical work on the processes and mechanisms by which decisions and policies are made within the museums and galleries sector' and limited 'specific knowledge about the basis on which these choices are made' (2011: 53). This article utilises two framing devices to support its analysis of empirical material drawn from a study that, amongst other things, responds to Gray's call for further engagement with decision-making processes, their mechanisms as well as their in-built assumptions and orthodoxies. Underpinning my analysis is the argument that austerity shapes these processes in ways that suggest it be understood as more than a set of financial conditions and instead as an pervasive atmosphere that envelopes organisations and their employees.

The first framing device I used is based on the distinction between information and knowledge for examining the bases on which decisions are made. I do so in order to highlight the way local authority protocol privileges certain types of information, perceived as legitimate knowledge on which to base decisions, over others. The conceptual framework of knowledge events and non-events substantiates this claim. Here, by directing attention to decision making processes as much as their products, I consider the people and technical practices involved in a decision, demonstrating that certain types of knowledge carry significantly more weight in terms of their ability to shape decisions, as well as being considered as more legitimate grounds for the subsequent justification of decisions than others.

In addition to a discussion of the knowledge politics of these decisions, I employ the notion of knowledge potency as the second framing device in order to show how austerity makes that which was already known and tolerable about individual museums unbearable given contemporary financial conditions. Potency is useful as it is variable quality, drawing attention to the way factors or knowledge already held about museums becomes increasingly influential in the way it effects decisions under austerity.

Several authors see austerity as more than a fiscal policy, rather an atmosphere that pervades individual lives and alters our relationship with the future (Kosselleck 2004; Coleman 2016; Hitchen 2016; Anderson 2017). These observations are pertinent to the paper's discussion of the potency of the ordinary under austerity. Local authority officers appear to share a sense that contemporary conditions, mainly the diminished availability of funding from central government, will prevail indefinitely or at least for a period of time they cannot foresee ending. Enveloped by the belief that future financial conditions will not be otherwise, local authorities become highly risk-averse, attempting to divest themselves of buildings that pose future financial risks. The belief that things will not improve shapes the type of museum local authorities can hold onto in the present: factors that would have been previously been thought of as mundane or peripheral become increasingly potent under austerity.

I begin with a discussion of attempts by individuals and groups external to local authorities to influence spending decisions using the concept of knowledge events and non-events to emphasise how legitimacy and agency are lent to certain types of information (rendered as knowledge) but not others. It is unsurprising that local government holds sway over these decisions, after all representative democracy delegates authority from people to governments who are then mandated to take decisions and actions based on their translation of the public interest. Hence, the failure of attempts by external groups to advocate for the value of these museums, by unsettling the use of visitor numbers as a proxy for what 'the public thinks' or 'how much the public values' through introducing alternative representations is only part of the story, and a secondary point of emphasis. My main purpose is to use these accounts to draw attention to the bases on which decisions are made by local authorities. I then consider a number of individual pieces of information about the local authority museums that feature in the study, illustrating how they take on increased potency because of austerity, read both as a set of financial conditions and as a wider atmosphere enveloping local authority personnel. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of a present and future system of local authority museum provision determined by such considerations.

Knowledge events and non-events: what counts as evidence?

What counts as evidence when local authorities make decisions about museum provision? In a context where these decisions result in long-term if not permanent

changes to how museums that have their funding withdrawn, such questions matter. As local authority officers ensemble documentation for circulation at meetings where decisions are taken, or as they write up accounts of decisions they have made themselves, we see their ability to influence this process as they decide what counts as legitimate (and illegitimate) knowledge for decision-makers to base their judgements on. This is a situation where not all knowledge claims are treated equally. Knowledge becomes a political matter when judgements are made as to what counts (or does not count) as appropriate grounds on which to base further action.

In order to examine the knowledge politics involved in decision-making processes surrounding museum provision, this article develops the notion of the knowledge event to describe a moment where the production context and contested methodologies of a piece of information disappear from view as that information becomes knowledge. What I want to isolate here are those moments where a statement is discernibly confirmed (or denied) as the legitimate basis for a decision, for example through its placement in a document file due to be circulated to decision-makers. The result of this event is that other statements or knowledge claims recede from the site of a decision, effectively failing to make themselves known in the places and at the moments that matter. In this article, the notion of the knowledge event is utilised to compare the work done by public sector staff with that of community groups as they attempt to gather together information to be incorporated into decision-making processes. Knowledge events, as I will illustrate, occur not solely because of human preferences, values or judgements but because of protocols and policies that mediate organisational activity in ways which, as Matthew Hull (2012: 134) summarises may go beyond the original intentions of their authors.

I develop the concept of the knowledge event following an engagement with Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Drawing on this work, and other scholars who use related methodologies and theoretical frameworks to trace processes of knowledge production, the concept of knowledge events and non-events is informed by Bruno Latour's early writing on scientific practices where claims about the world gain their status as knowledge through a series of processes he stressed as involving material and social relations (1986: 5-6; 1987). More than this, and significant for a study of local authorities where documents are part and parcel of work-worlds, Latour saw something distinctive in the documentary form and representations such as maps and graphs as a means of communicating and disseminating statements about the world. Paper, with its ability to travel across time and space, allowed scientists to convince others of the truth of their representations (Latour 1986: 5). Graphical representations, in their erasure of inconsistency and contingency, and when placed at the site of decisions and in the hands of decision-makers, become the terrain ('the reality') on which further action is based, and one which is resistant to challenge from others whose ways of knowing the world are not afforded the same certitude. Drawing on Sarah Whatmore's and

Catharina Landstrom's observations regarding how 'scientific circumspection [into the provisional and contingent nature of knowledge produced through their standard methods] becomes dulled' as these methods become the standard practice of government agencies (2011: 585-6), what happens is a process where claims made in one context, perhaps on the proviso that they contain assumptions and inconsistencies, are taken up by others who, believing that they act as a reliable way of knowing about a topic, commit acts of erasure where disorder gives way to order, and statements are repackaged as knowledge. These observations are important for my analysis as there was clear blue water between what counted as 'knowledge' and those propositions characterised as irrelevant 'information', thus lacking the substance required to inform decisions. In this article, thinking about knowledge events and non-events enables critical thinking about how decisions are made, and the 'information/knowledge' allowed to shape them. In what follows, I compare instances of knowledge events and non-events to emphasise that which counts and that which doesn't count as appropriate evidence across the cases. To repeat an earlier point, these judgements are made by people. However, in deciding to include or omit a piece of information from a document of this type, the actions of local authority officers do not necessarily intend to crowd out vernacular or other knowledge claims regarding the museum's value. Rather, their decisions, I would suggest, are expressions of common sense views and settled organisational routines as regards what counts as evidence, as I will go on to show.

As documentation from the Unitary Council and Metropolitan District Council illustrate, information gathered by local authorities appears to have a greater chance of inclusion in a knowledge event than that elicited by external groups. More significantly, local authorities give preferential treatment to their ways of assessing 'what the public thinks' than direct appeals by the public where their opinions are made known. The non-presence of 'information' gathered by petitions in response to proposed funding withdrawal from museums compared with the presence of 'knowledge' gathered by council surveys highlights this.

Petitions were the main tactic used by external groups to communicate their disagreement with local authority plans. The core member of one such group summarised the initial course of action pursued:

'After browsing through committee meetings that are recorded down and they gave the pre-warning that community centres and some museums would be going, we set up an action group, a campaign group to try and save [Unitary Council Museum], so that was our first target to try and encourage the Council to not close it, so we spent several years doing that' (interview, April 2015)

Multiple petitions circulated, making an argument against the proposed closure should a group with a 'viable' business plan not be found. In other words, although the stated aims of the council were to keep the building open by transferring

responsibility for its management and operation to an external organisation, no commitments were made in documentation from the period to continue funding the building should a group of this nature remain elusive. However, as we will see, council policies require petitions to meet certain criteria for the truths they state be taken up as 'knowledge'. These policies set the bar high for arguments made by external groups to generate knowledge events, as this excerpt from Unitary Council's 'Petitions Guidance' illustrates:

'If your petition has received at least 100 signatures it will be reported to full Council, and the lead petitioner will be allowed a maximum of three minutes to speak to the petition. This will be confined to reading out, or summarising the substance of the petition and making relevant further supporting remarks. The petition will not be the subject of a debate, and Members will not ask questions of the Lead Petitioner' (Unitary Council 2010: n. pag.)

Notably, then, the claims contained within the petitions are retained online. Both petitions included statements from individuals highlighting the importance of the museum to them and to the people living in the area as well as the conventional signatures. Yet, the only reference to the information presented therein to be found in council documentation is a line in the 'Petitions Annual Report' acknowledging that a petition was mounted and was heard, but not debated, by the council. The petitioners' claims on the museum are not contested in an explicit manner, but they are a non-event as they are prevented from effecting future courses of action as they are omitted from documentation intended to have a presence in situations where decisions will be taken. Conversely, in documentation produced by the council and circulated to attendees of meetings where budget decisions were taken, several knowledge events can be discerned where information of a limited and highly contestable nature was presented, and taken up as relevant to, questions over public resource allocation relating to museums. I present one such event here, to illustrate the ease by which contestable information gathered by the council becomes knowledge.

The document pack prepared for a meeting where approval was sought and gained for the council's budget plans and asset management rethink reported the results of a public consultation exercise. The consultation asked respondents to rank ten public services and spaces the council spent money on at the time in order of importance; it was not stated whether importance was to be read as importance to them as self-interested individuals or to the broader population of the area. Unsurprisingly, as the museum was pitched against children's centres and support for vulnerable groups, it fared poorly with 4% of respondents naming the museum as at the top of their priorities. The results were combined with the following statement which suggests a knowledge event has occurred:

‘The results have provided a useful insight into public opinion and this has been used, together with Members’ feedback from Overview and Scrutiny Committees to help shape the influence the budget proposals for 2011/12’ (Unitary Council 2011: 8).

There are four reasons that make this a knowledge event whereas the petitions are strictly a non-event. The placement of the results alongside a statement claiming their representativeness of public opinion elevates what is a small sample (n=1000) from perspectives given by specific and situated individuals into knowledge of public opinion, framed as a homogenous collective. Inclusion of the information in a document intended for circulation to attendees of a meeting out of which a decision will emerge establishes it as grounds for further action. Relatedly, omitting the details of the consultation methodology means readers have no access to the processes involved in producing the data, discouraging questions regarding whether such a consultation is an appropriate method to engage the ‘public’ in deliberation on spending decisions. Finally, the knowledge is fixed and stabilised as part of the publicly-accessible record, accessible to publics of the future in search of the bases on which their representatives made decisions about spending. In this example, and the next, documents are one way to discern the knowledge considered as relevant to the decision. Additionally, both examples demonstrate how numbers, albeit those gathered via questionable methods, act as a reliable source of guidance in a set of contested claims, standing for ‘what the public thinks’. Numbers appear to be particularly attractive to council officers attempting to pursue the least worst option under austerity.

The officer responsible for managing the relationship between the Metropolitan District Council and the external groups arguing against the proposals to withdraw funding and staff from District Council Museum commented on the basis for the decision:

‘There were two key pieces of information or thinking that informed our decision. One was when we looked across the service, we were looking at the audience we were attracting, and then we looked at what potential there might be for growth. The visitor figures were poor, and resources to improve that would had to have been significant’ (interview, February 2014)

Here, the interviewee is making reference to a very specific parcel of knowledge. This can be found in a document produced to inform budgetary decisions in 2013-14 (three years after the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review). The main document does not reference specific museums or data pertaining to them. Rather, the solution to focus on ‘delivering a core offer from fewer sites’ (Metropolitan District Council 2013: 113) is presented. In the supporting appendices is a graph comparing visitor numbers across the seven museum sites operated by the Metropolitan District Council across a six-year period. The officer quoted above refers to these statistics

at several points in the interview to support the decision to withdraw funding from Museum 2. A senior officer emphasised the influence of this set of visitor numbers on the decision too:

'I think the argument is 'it was a minor museum, providing a fairly small scale service, it was quite expensive for the number of people who benefitted from it'. In the current financial situation, it was hard to justify paying that amount of money for the people that used it' (interview, July 2015).

Visitor numbers, gathered by an external agency commissioned to run an annual exit survey across the Council's sites, and a rudimentary cost-per-use calculation are preferred forms of evidence here. The statement in the first quote, 'the visitor figures were poor', suggests the importance of comparison in this decision with the value of the museum evaluated in terms of its visitor numbers when set against other museums. Vitally, however, not all museums are created equal meaning the ability to perform in the way required here is unevenly distributed across the Council's seven sites. District Council Museum is a small site, and during the period of data collection, had limited opening hours with displays which had not been updated for a while. Methodologically, then, the comparison between sites based on visitor numbers can be questioned. Yet, the force of the knowledge contained within the graph is discernible in the two quotes presented above. Relatedly, that that graph was the only piece of information selected for inclusion in the document is evidence of its primacy within the 'thinking' and 'arguments' of council officers as they prepared information for presentation to decision-makers. Again, this is a question of visibility and what information is transported where by virtue of its inclusion or exclusion from organisational documents. There is certitude in the graph in its presentation of District Council Museum as lower down in the hierarchy of the seven sites, implicitly suggesting that the public value this museum less. As in the example above, its inclusion can be understood as a knowledge event, particularly given the numerous times its knowledge is called upon in such a way as to suggest it settles the matter: withdrawing funding in full from District Council Museum is common sense as it is clearly of lower quality than its (larger and historically better resourced) counterparts.

This argument provoked controversy among museum user groups and others who objected to the truths on which it relies. Not only had the council failed to consult these groups before the decision as to which museum would have its funding withdrawn was taken, they had also called upon knowledge that was partial and failed to take account of site-specific characteristics as the basis for their decision. A comment made by the council officer suggested that there was a stage in the decision-making process where the actions of the public could have brought the council's 'thinking' to a temporary halt:

'We started in November 2013 with press coverage about potential closure, we expected at least an increase in visitors as a result because people would visit it for the first time or the last time, it hasn't made a stick of difference. The Friends took 600 signatures...one Saturday as a petition. If every one of those people had visited on that day, or half of them, we'd have got more than the 34 visitors we did get. Do you know what I mean? That might have changed things' (interview, February 2014).

Here, as this interviewee shows, visitor numbers are high up in the hierarchy of evidence, intuitively used as a proxy for value. More specifically, the main consideration for the closure of District Council Museum over others is that the number of people affected by the decision is fewer than the alternatives. Against this premise, and the recurrence of the knowledge event where the graphic representation of visiting practice shape and influence the judgement of others, the campaign group sought to bring other forms of information to bear on the situation. The officer quoted above described their endeavours as such:

'They challenge the visitor figures and they reference the Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Survey which really compliments them on the welcome' (interview, February 2014).

In this statement 'they' refers to the museum friends group who are represented, implicitly, not to believe the visitor figures gathered by the council. However, an alternative account would view their 'challenge' as a counter-claim to the centrality of one parcel of evidence, one type of knowledge as influential in the decision. Furthermore, the labour done by numbers in this case is extensive with visitor quantity repeatedly given preferential treatment over visit quality, or other processes besides the museum visit where the museum can be said to generate benefits. The dynamic here is not entirely exclusionary. Rather, an implicit filtration mechanism is in place where criteria for entrance into the knowledge event are highly restrictive. Rendering these criteria and how they influence real-life examples of decision-making is important for, in Nikolas Rose's terms, statistics appear to disclose reality when, in fact, their deployment involves political judgements over what will be measured, how, how often and its subsequent interpretation and presentation (1991: 675, quoting Alonso and Starr 1987). As such, where this authority to make such a judgement resides is a matter of concern. Taken together, these two examples of knowledge events and non-events illustrate the preferential treatment given to certain forms of knowledge and methods for knowledge production over others. Decisions about museums are taken based on standard approaches to gathering information. In one case, the information was gathered in a context where the contributions were sought with their knowledge that the information provided would be used in an assessment about council spending priorities. However, in the other, the visiting habits of the public are retrospectively drawn upon as evidence of the museum's underperformance and undervaluation by the public, gaining significant

traction with decision-makers, to the neglect of other attempts to alter the bases on which decisions were made. In this discussion, I have focused on what counts as evidence – both in terms of what is included as appropriate knowledge on which to base decisions and what was called forth by interviewees to legitimate decisions taken. In the next section, through the lens of ‘potent knowledge’, I explore the discernible influence of a museum’s mundane characteristics on assessments of a museum’s future viability in a context of austerity budgets.

Potent Knowledge

‘There were two key pieces of information or thinking that informed our decision’, states a local authority officer when asked how a decision was made to withdraw funding from the museum in question. In this section I select two pieces of information relating to two different museums, deploying the notion of ‘potent knowledge’ as a means to highlight the way austerity, read as financial and atmospheric conditions, acts to increase the potency of information already known about museums. Put simply, museums with certain characteristics present difficulties to local authorities with a pressing need to make savings in the present and who cannot rely on an improved future such that seemingly ordinary information (size, distance from city centres and existing and anticipated maintenance costs) becomes a potent influence in determining which museums can be retained within council control.

Decisions about museums involve the privileging of certain types of evidence over others, as the previous section has illustrated, but they also involve highly ordinary concerns such as existing and anticipated maintenance costs. The costs associated with maintaining museum buildings, which are often protected historic buildings with complicated requirements, are high. In two cases, interviewees drew attention to maintenance and ongoing running costs as one of the reasons why the council felt it imperative that their liability for these costs was removed:

‘A very substantial cost of things like [Metropolitan District Council Museum] are the costs of running the building and the council’s budget position is clear. It needs to remove the financial liability of running and maintaining that building...we have got to make budget progress, we have to take a total of £200m out of the budget’ (Metropolitan District Council Director of Regeneration and Culture, interview July 2015).

‘The council have to be more efficient and effective...with the budget cuts, every year in the budget review we are assessing where we are going to save money, but also thinking about what is going to cost us money’

‘Mundane things, electricity, gas, insurance, maintenance, all those things have to be worked through...the City Council wants to encourage groups and

organisations to take these on wholeheartedly as part of budget savings...it is a sea change and whilst I think it might slow down, this is the way it is going, in another 10-15 years' time, it will be the norm won't it' (Unitary Council Voluntary Sector Policy and Strategy Officer, interview March 2015)

Discernible in these quotations are the priorities of local authority asset management departments that revolve around key words such as 'reducing running costs' and 'full cost recovery' (securing funding via income generation or other non-council means for all the costs of running a building or service). We see here how established patterns of underinvestment in certain council properties, meaning future resources required for maintenance and necessary improvements are higher than those properties that have been well-maintained over time, become potent determinants of whether a local authority wants to remain liable for a building. As such, buildings that require specialist maintenance are at higher risk than modern sites. Furthermore, there is a sense of panic in the quotes ('we have to make budget progress') coupled with a sense of resignation ('it'll be the norm won't it'). Austerity measures are a central government initiative and the financial circumstances enveloping local authorities are a consequence of decisions taken at central government level. Yet, although government administrations are subject to change, these quotes – and the empirical material more broadly – suggest change is not anticipated to be on the horizon. On the contrary, a future where the council might be in a position to bear some of these costs has disappeared from view. Not only that, but the imperative to 'make budget progress' carries an immediacy which means local authorities cannot stall in the hope of a change of heart at central government level. Local authorities are required by law to have a balanced budget, meaning any costs ('liabilities') that present challenges to their objective of ensuring income equals spend become untenable.

The second piece of 'potent knowledge' I discuss gains its potency from this situation where income must equal spend. The requirement for a balanced budget refers to the whole gamut of council spending, including on statutory services such as adult social care and children's services. However, the empirical material suggests the idea of income equalling spend is being applied to individual museum sites such that buildings that cannot raise sufficient income to pay for running costs and ongoing maintenance become liabilities. Speaking on the decision to withdraw funding from the Metropolitan District Council Museum, the interviewee commented:

'It's often difficult to track down the turning point of a particular decision, what is very clear is that there was a very specific budget decision to take the budget away and effectively to end the running of a museum service...I don't think it was financially viable, I do not think there was an ability to make money out of running that museum sufficient to pay for the cost of running the museum' (Metropolitan District Council Director of Regeneration and Culture, interview July 2015).

The museum being spoken about here is small, has limited spaces for events and no retail or café space, factors that make it vulnerable to the charge of financial unviability when what this means is the ability to cover its costs as subsidy is no longer a tenable option. Relatedly, the other museum, previously managed as part of the Unitary Council's museum service is similarly disadvantaged for its in-built inability to perform as required by the council. The Unitary Council Museum is smaller than its counterparts and is in an isolated location on the outskirts of the city centre whereas the other museums managed by the council are easily accessible by visitors to the area due to their proximity to transport infrastructure. This Unitary Authority have objectives to become 'a net-wealth creator' in a 'move from dependency in terms of what comes in from government' (Unitary Authority Strategic Manager, interview March 2015), with the department responsible for deciding which buildings to continue investing in and which to cut citing objectives aligned around economic development, inward investment and tourism. Against this backdrop, mundane factors such as a museum's location, size and 'fit' within council narratives of place identity become potent in their influence on whether a museum is considered to be a good investment for the council. Small museums which may generate other benefits simply cannot compete on these terms, meaning museum survival in the face of austerity is much more a matter of pre-existing characteristics and tenable circumstances than it is a consideration of the benefits generated by individual museums and for whom. Where a consideration of benefits generated appears to play a role, it is only those museums believed to generate benefits required by departments beyond the museum service that appear to have a chance of being considered as viable investments for the future.

Conclusion

This paper has pursued two linked objectives. In its first, and most substantial section, it has foregrounded the type of knowledge that counts as evidence when decisions are taken about museums.

The process-orientated account, informed by an engagement with STS and ANT, highlighted the information contained within documents as key to decision-making practices, using the framing device of knowledge events and non-events to emphasise that certain types of knowledge and the methods used to generate them are drawn upon as a matter of routine by local authority officers. This is not a question of the intentional exclusion of other knowledges such as those generated via petitions by local government personnel. Rather, certain knowledge is taken to be self-evidently relevant leading to its inclusion in documentation produced to inform decisions whereby it stands as uncontentious fact. The example of visitor numbers is notable in this regard as officers clearly felt it common-sense to direct spending away from a museum with such 'low' numbers. However, this identification of the visitor numbers as low was a result of comparing the figures alongside museums

that were not of the same type and thus not appropriate comparisons. Nevertheless, there was a sense in which visitor numbers were a legitimate means of assessing 'what the public thinks' about a museum, resulting in this information becoming one facet of how decisions were made. As argued throughout the paper, when decisions result in permanent or long-term changes in how individual museums are financed, managed and governed as well as altering the scale, distribution and character of local authority museum provision, a consideration of the assumptions and exclusions built into routine mechanisms and techniques is an important matter for scholarly and public debate.

The second section expands the discussion further to show that multiple pieces of information add up to a decision. Multiple factors are involved, meaning decisions are not best understood via a language suggestive of singular determining influences. More specifically, using the heuristic of knowledge potency I show how relatively mundane information becomes significant when local authorities are enveloped by austerity. The highly ordinary matter of maintenance bills (built up over time as certain museums have not been prioritised) and running costs that appear untenable when set against the potential of a building to generate sufficient income to cover its costs hold significant sway in informing which museums are seen as liabilities and which are seen as good investments. To a degree, these findings support Lagerqvist's observations relating to the heritage sector in Ireland since the 2008 financial crisis. Lagerqvist writes of the particular impacts and values generated by heritage that have been prioritised in policy documents and other government statements since the cuts, namely 'job creation, capital leverage, and heritage tourism...economic values and business logics' (2016: 67). Two points need to be made here. First, the impacts Lagerqvist identifies do not carry the same influence across the two cases, indicating the need for empirical work that attends to how these discursive prioritisations play out in practice. Secondly, while there is a need to address the prioritisation of certain benefits over others by local authorities when they decide how to spend scarce resources, doing so in a context of austerity and severe cuts that are read as unending requires that that we are sensitive to why this is the case. Local authorities are not prioritising these benefits for their own sake: the severity of the cuts means they have little choice but to channel their limited resources towards museums that they believe hold the potential to pay for their own running costs or that help cash-strapped local authorities in dire need of (private) investment as a means to replace the funds they have lost as a result of central government decisions.

Observations made by Gray in relation to the expectations placed on their museums by local authorities in a pre-austerity context are relevant here. As Gray notes, (2008: 210) it is one thing for local authorities to expect museums to have 'an impact across more than their own sectoral concerns' and another for these external impacts to become 'the only ones that are seen as being of importance in assessing organizational effectiveness in the museums and galleries sector'. The discussion in

the second section illustrates what appears to be a gradual progression from the assessment of 'organizational effectiveness' on these terms to a situation where organizational futures become more or less viable depending on the perceived ability of an individual museum to have certain impacts. As discussed above, certain impacts become important for their ability to gain traction with external funders (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016) and because they generate the necessary income to pay a museum's running costs. When subsidy is re-articulated as investment, museums that cannot pay for themselves, by generating impacts that garner investment (public, private or otherwise), become the casualties of austerity. Not only does austerity intensify pre-existing conditions, it makes existing circumstances unbearable by unsettling the promise that the future financial conditions will be different from the present-day.

An ancillary finding of this paper relates to the knowledge politics of document production within local authorities. Finalising a document for circulation to decision-makers is a highly political moment as it involves making a cut between information elevated to knowledge and information downgraded as disposable (Rex 2018b; Freeman and Maybin 2011: 161). Selecting a piece of information for inclusion in a document which is set to travel across the local authority and presenting that information as though it were settled knowledge is a process involving erasure of the circumstances in which that information was gathered. This points towards the value of attending to the process of decision making and the human and non-human actors involved as a means of producing more grounded accounts of how and on what basis decisions are made.

While these findings are limited to two English local authorities, I suggest its observations of the way existing orthodoxies persist alongside newly potent considerations, informing which museums are considered viable in conditions of austerity, as well as the conceptual framework used to analyse the empirical material, could inform further empirical engagement with instances where decisions about public service provision are being made about museums or other types of cultural provision.

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ⁱ <http://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/funding-cuts/fighting-the-cuts>